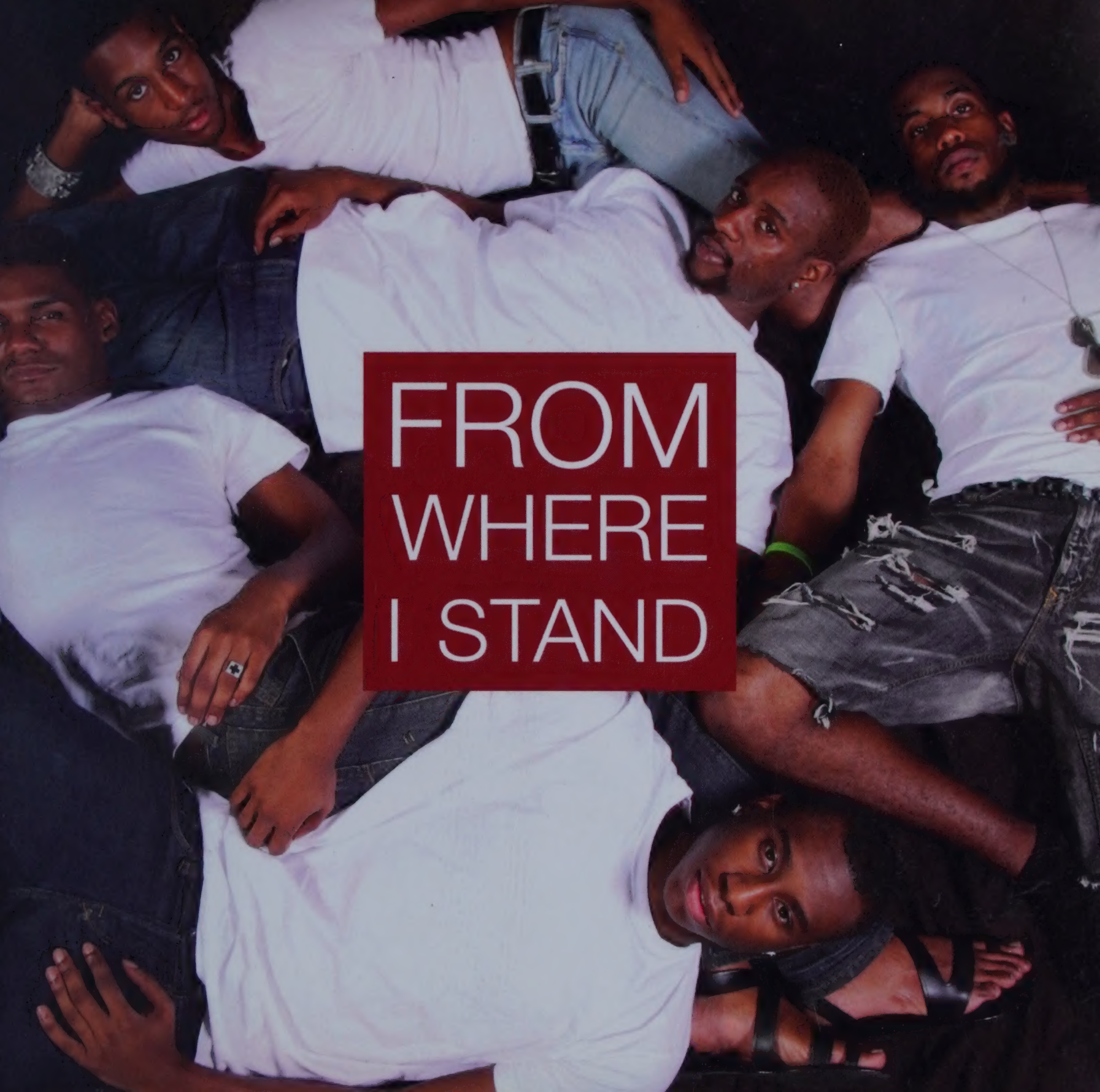

FROM WHERE I STAND

Foreword for "From Where I Stand"

AID Atlanta's From Where I Stand campaign and its resulting book of portraits represent an essential challenge to the notion that there is one homogenous community of Black gay, bisexual, same gender loving individuals. This is an important moment to raise such distinction as the "Black MSM" community is more and more targeted by public health interventions as efforts intensify to stem the rising tide of HIV that seems ready to engulf a new generation of young people.

From Where I Stand insists on the power of young men themselves to actively shape discourse to better reflect their own lived experiences, pleasures, bodies, gender expression, and diverse dynamic forms of community. More urgently, it calls for a public health approach that builds on the resiliency and innovation already within the community, and indeed present in the gaze of each man portrayed in this beautiful book.

Atlanta itself plays a huge role in the minds of young Black Gay men nationally, in its imaginary potential for self realization, community expression, empowerment, and sense of place. Looking through the photographs featured in this compilation, it is apparent that Atlanta itself is not homogeneous either—but a conglomeration of neighborhoods, communities, sounds, sights, and places which shape gender and sexual expression as youth move in and out of neighborhoods, on and off buses and trains, shifting their weight, stance, gaze, and subtleties of expression until they ultimately arrive at their own, embodied sense of self identity. It is agencies like AID Atlanta and countless other community-based organizations across the United States that not only provide safe harbor for young people as they forge their way to their own sense of self identity, but that also through cultural production such as the From Where I Stand campaign. This campaign—its billboards, its presentations, its online presence and media—begin to change the social landscape for young people in crucial ways. It creates new ways for the public to think about the "Black MSM" community, and gives voice for those within the community itself. We forget about the importance of cultural expression and artistry in the fight against HIV, homophobia, and stigma. In an era of 'evidence-based interventions' those in public health must also collaborate with artists and find other creative avenues to reach young people most impacted by the epidemic.

This book also gives voice to a unique community, the house ball community, that has historically had to fight for its right to exist. Incredibly, the house ball community has sustained, and has endeavored to carve out space for community building and performance that is based on a complex gender/sex system, a sense of family and acceptance, and a collective celebration of creativity, innovation, artistic expression, and beauty. With each provocative statement beginning with “From Where I Stand,” the underlying pulse of this achievement reminds us all to not be reductive, to be respectful, to question our assumptions, to validate experiences not our own and above all to listen. We might learn something.

The young men featured in this book speak for themselves and they speak volumes. Among their pearls of wisdom and insight are pride in one’s culture, a refusal to be reduced to mere statistics, words of self affirmation and love, celebrations of varied forms of family and friendships, refreshing and positive visions of masculinity and manhood, acknowledgement of the deep connections established in physical sexual acts and the recognition that the body is priceless, calls to end to societal processes the perpetuate inequality and sickness, namely homelessness, poverty, stereotypes, stigma, and the danger of silence in the face of injustice. The wisdom of youth is often neglected, forgotten, or simply dismissed. In this arresting campaign and beautifully rendered book of photographs and narratives, we must take the time to listen and pay attention. Thank you to all of the young people who contributed their thoughts and self portraits to the From Where I Stand campaign. You are an inspiration and a beacon for us all in a dark time.

Emily A. Arnold, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Center for AIDS Prevention Studies, University of California San Francisco

Atlanta Ballroom History

The ballroom scene started in the 1970's in New York City's gay black and hispanic communities. Members of these communities formed groups known as "houses" to support each other physically, mentally, and emotionally. These houses serves as unconventional families for their members, complete with a "mother" and a "father." The ballroom community provided the community an opportunity for its members to express themselves through dance and competition in multiple categories that ranged from "vogue", "face", "realness", and "fashion" categories.

Over the years the ballroom scene has achieved national status, spreading out of New York City to every major city in the country, and arriving in Atlanta in the mid 1990's. Balls had been thrown in Atlanta prior, but it was the House of Escada that put the Atlanta Ballroom Scene on the map by throwing Atlanta's first major ball in 1996. The ball brought houses from all over the country to Atlanta to compete.

Among the first major houses in the Atlanta ballroom scene were the House of Milan, the House of Chanel, the House of Givenchy, the House of Omni, the House of Ebony, and the House of Supreme. There are now 13 major houses in Atlanta, with over a thousand people actively participating in ballroom competitions. The Atlanta ballroom scene has produces various notable figures, from Icons to Legends, and Mothers and Fathers, who came together to form an alliance to help regulate the scene and foster growth.

In our book, From Where I Stand, we have presented a snap shot of the Atlanta ballroom community. All of the models in the book are members of houses throughout Atlanta. The images and text help tell a story of black gay culture in the city, with emphasis on the strength, beauty, and resilience of the young black gay man.

Reflections

"30 years ago, I too was a young gay man seeking sex and a sense of belonging amidst the shiny ruins of a metropolis seething with liplicking pleasures and pitfalls. Looking "back in wonder", i know that were it not for my friends and safe spaces like the Friday night GMAD meetings, the Pier, and Better Days I could not have gotten over! Young black gay men of any generation need networks of peers and elders whom they can relate to and learn from. Black gay men in their 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s and beyond need to find roles, be valued, as communities queer and "straight" edge them further out to the margins with every birthday.

I work with young men not only because I care about them or because I have something of use to offer. This work is also "for my own protection" as it affords me, at 51, the chance to be needed and appreciated as my sexual desirability or labor productivity depreciates. I help build events and institutions to ensure continuity that they might know a place of their own, and that there were people before them who stood up so that they walk upright or fly. I want them, want us to be assured a stable community with sites, services and activities led by and for gay men where we can play, work, love, teach, learn and live joyful and fruitful lives"

-Craig Washington

Prevention Programs Manager, AID Atlanta

"Age won't always depict wisdom."

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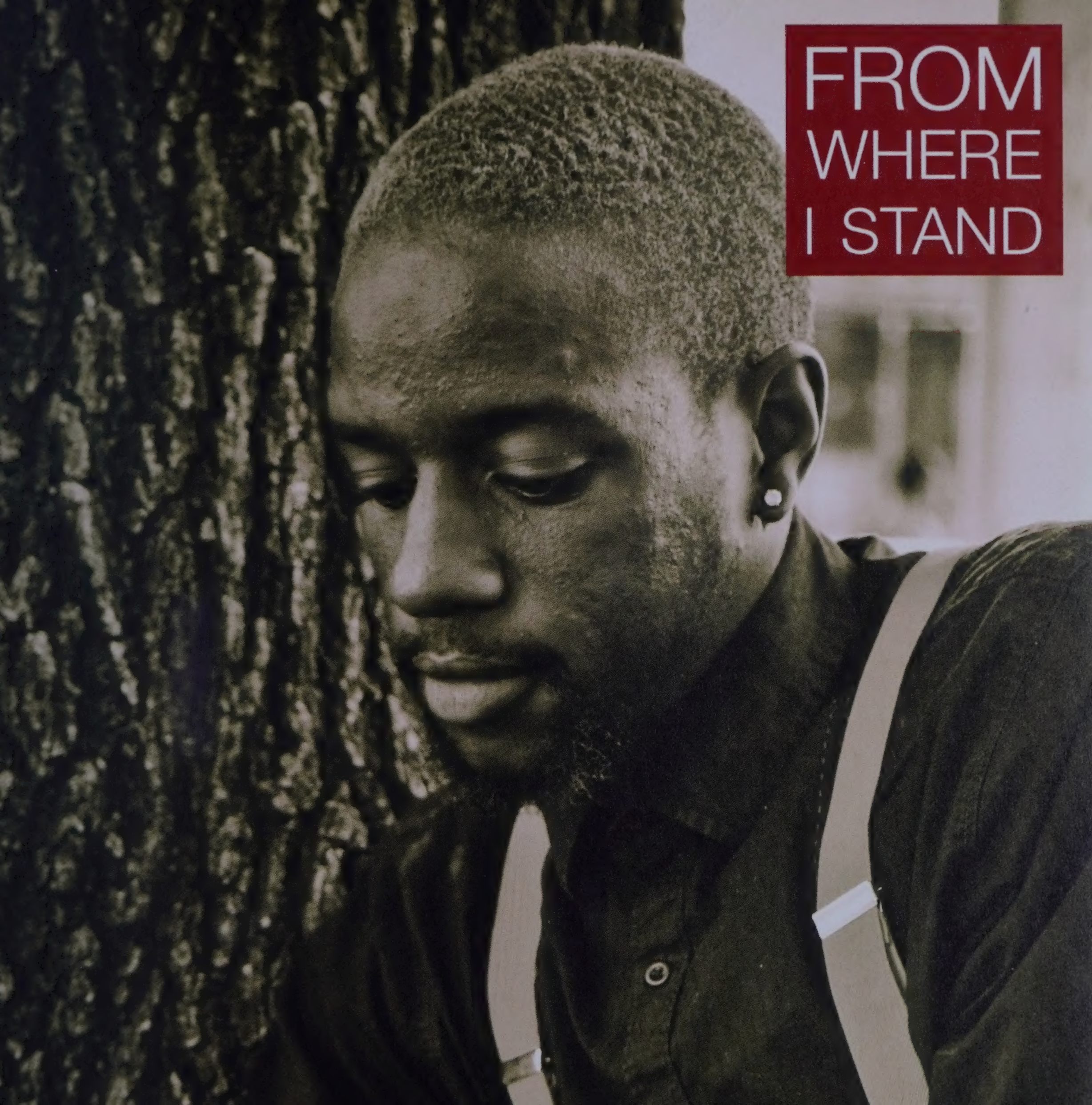

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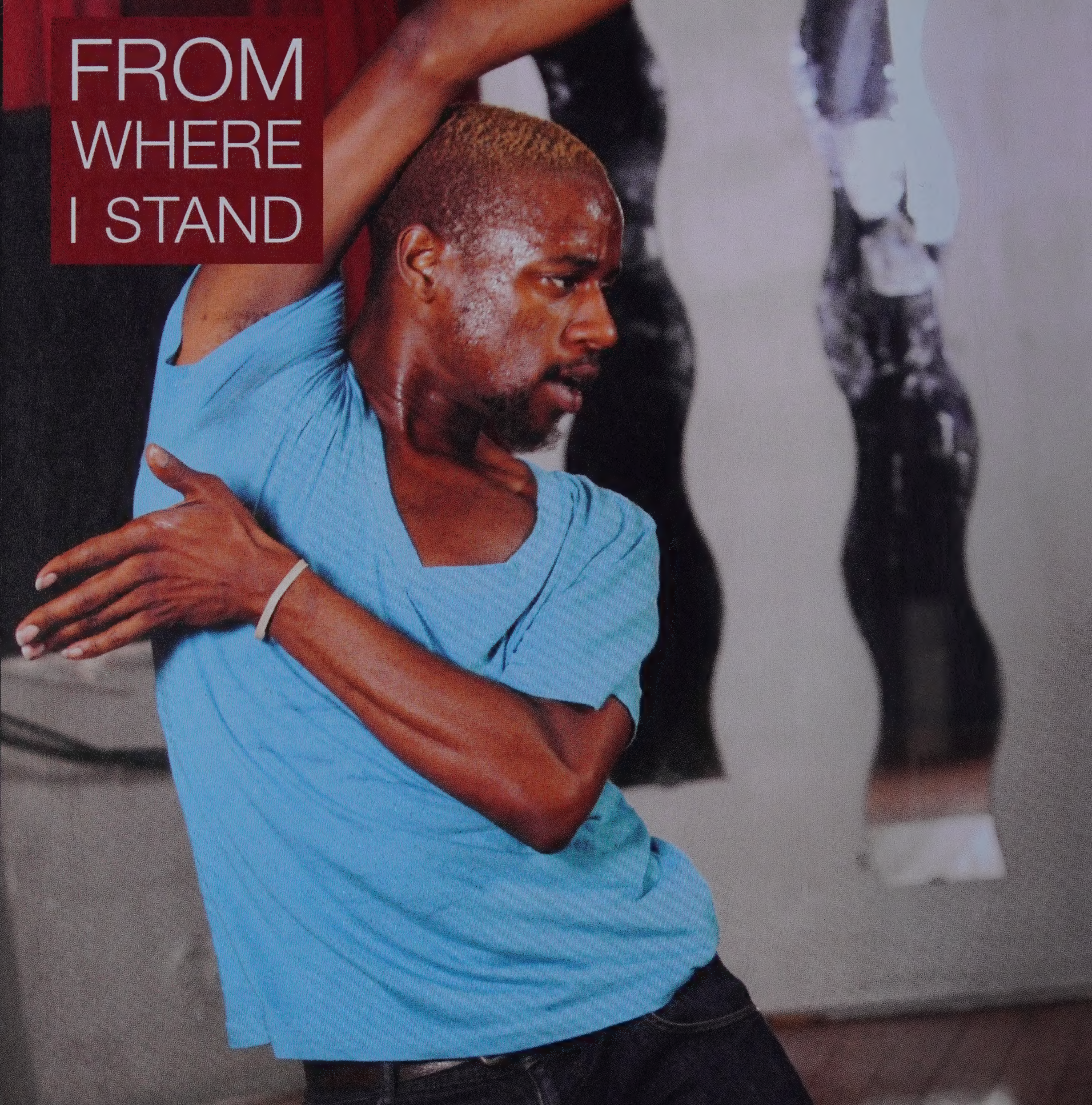

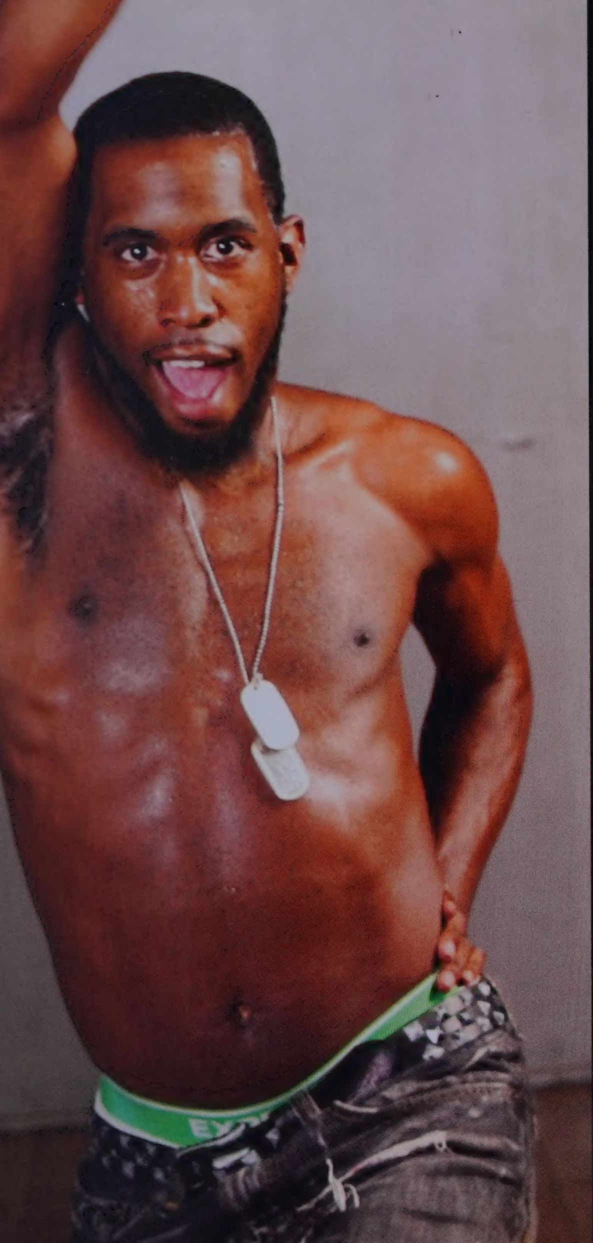

"Your approval is neither desired nor required, but I will take your acceptance."

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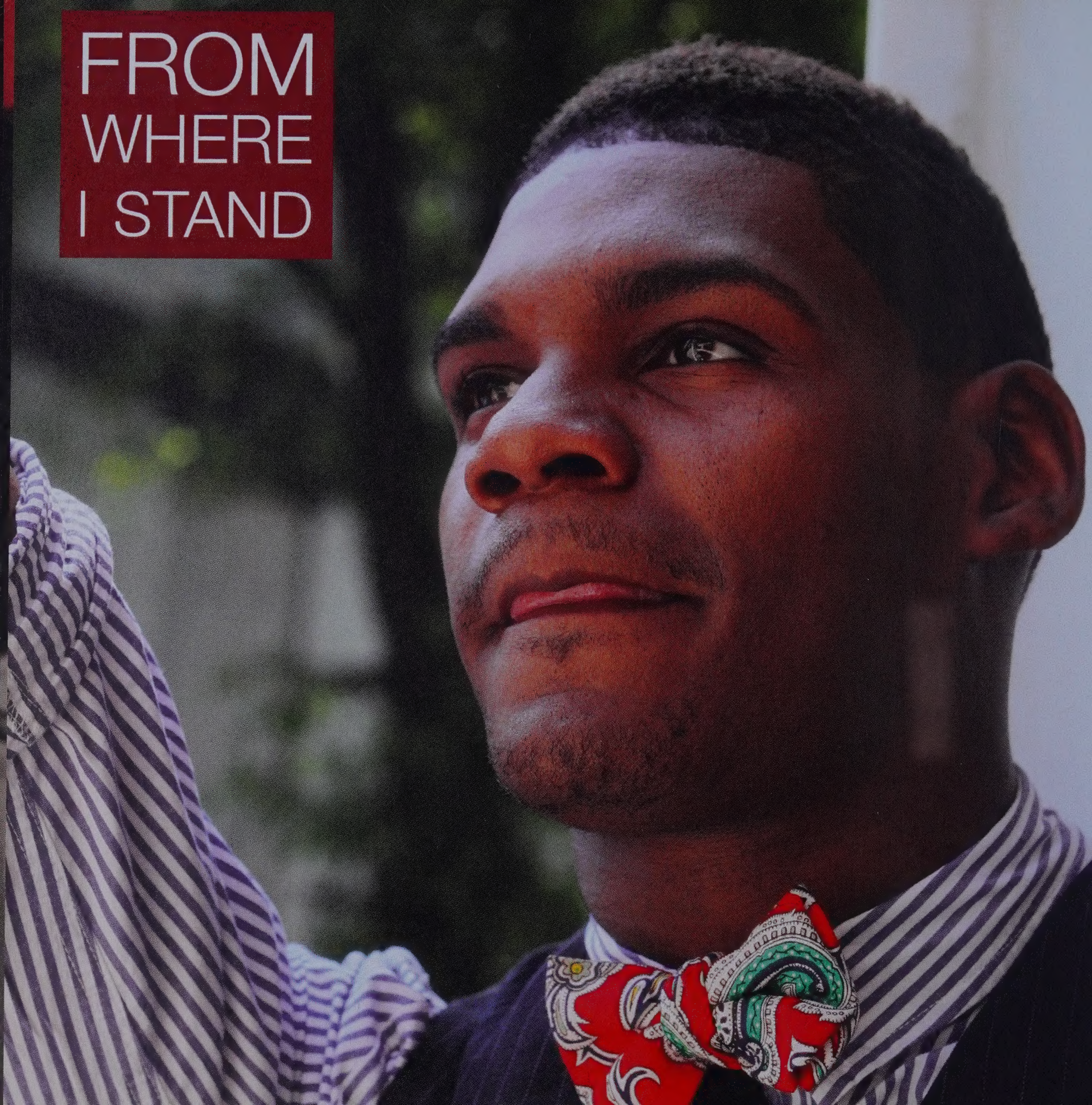

"Education is our passport to the future."

"I am young, black, gay, and loving it!!!!"

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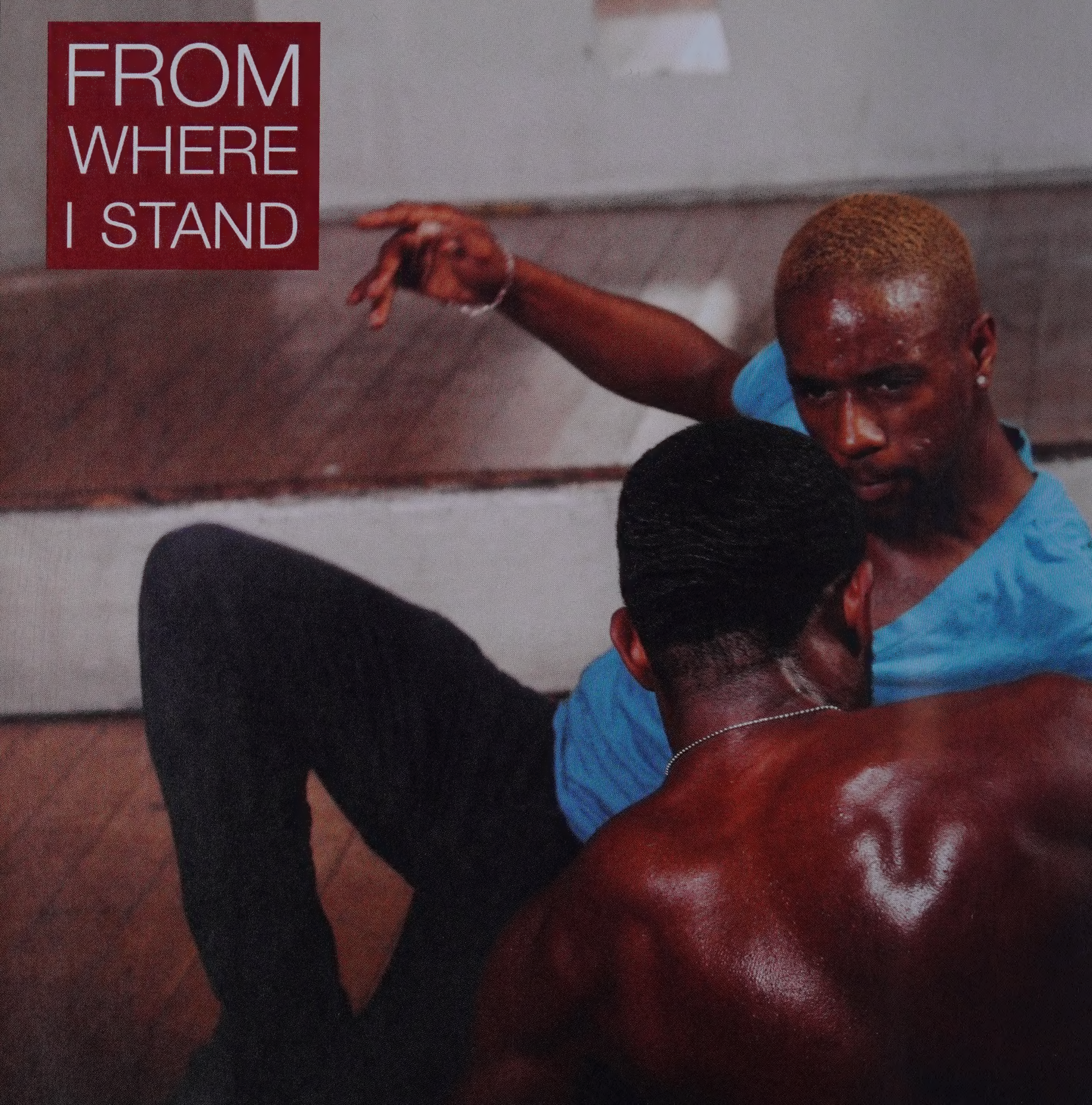
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"I find inspiration in
the good, the bad
and the ugly
because all things
can inspire if you mind
and see."

"If we can put a man on the moon we should be able to end world hunger, homelessness and poverty."

FROM WHERE I STAND

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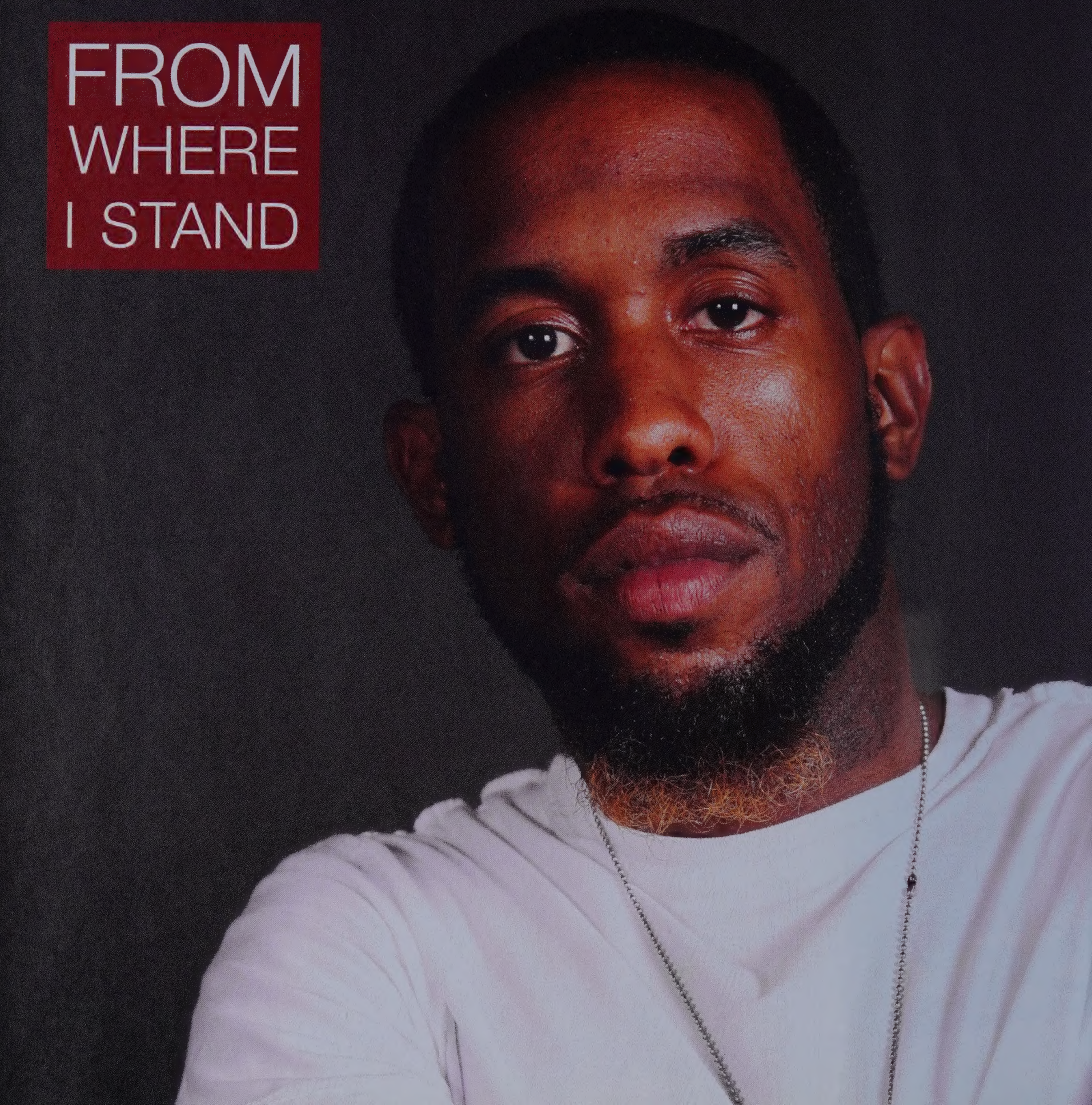

"My body is priceless and will not be compromised."

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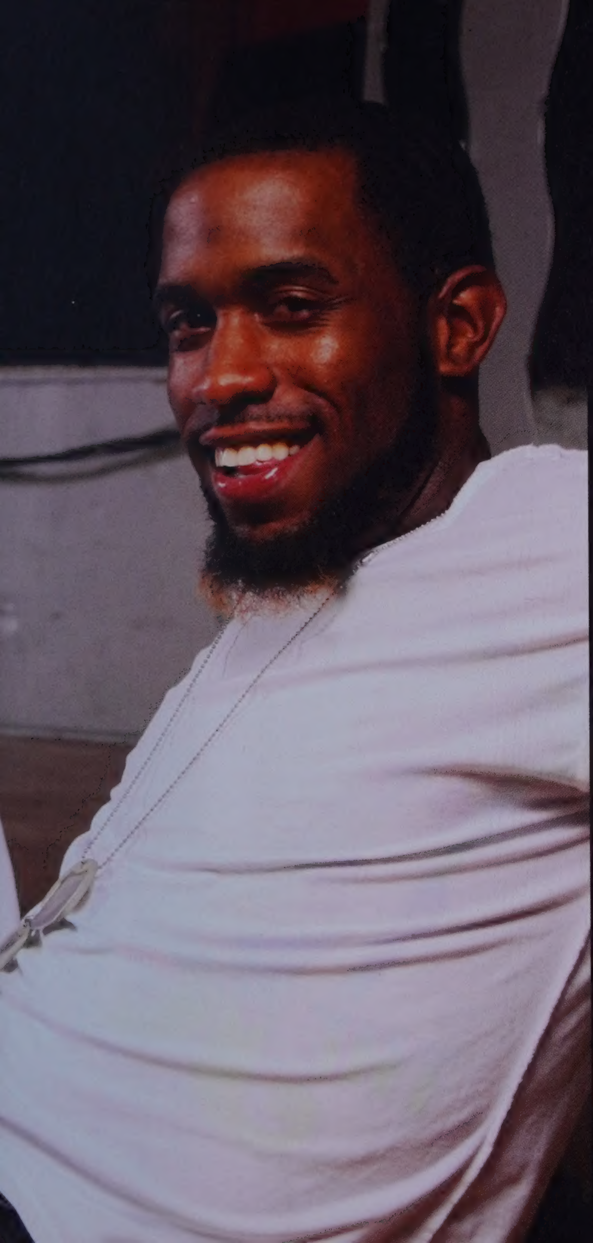
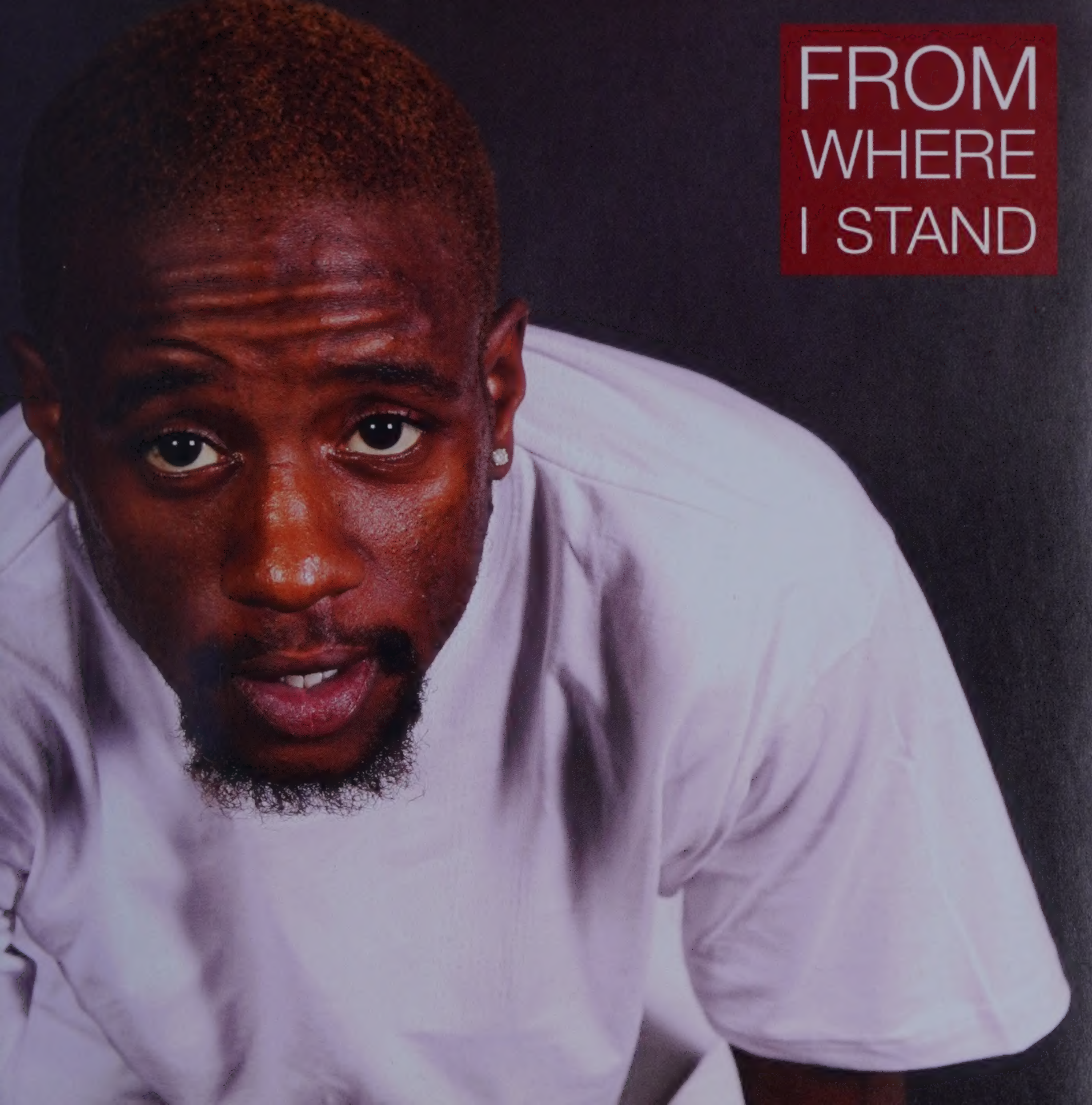


"My friends are my family and my family are my friends."

"My mind out shines my sexuality."



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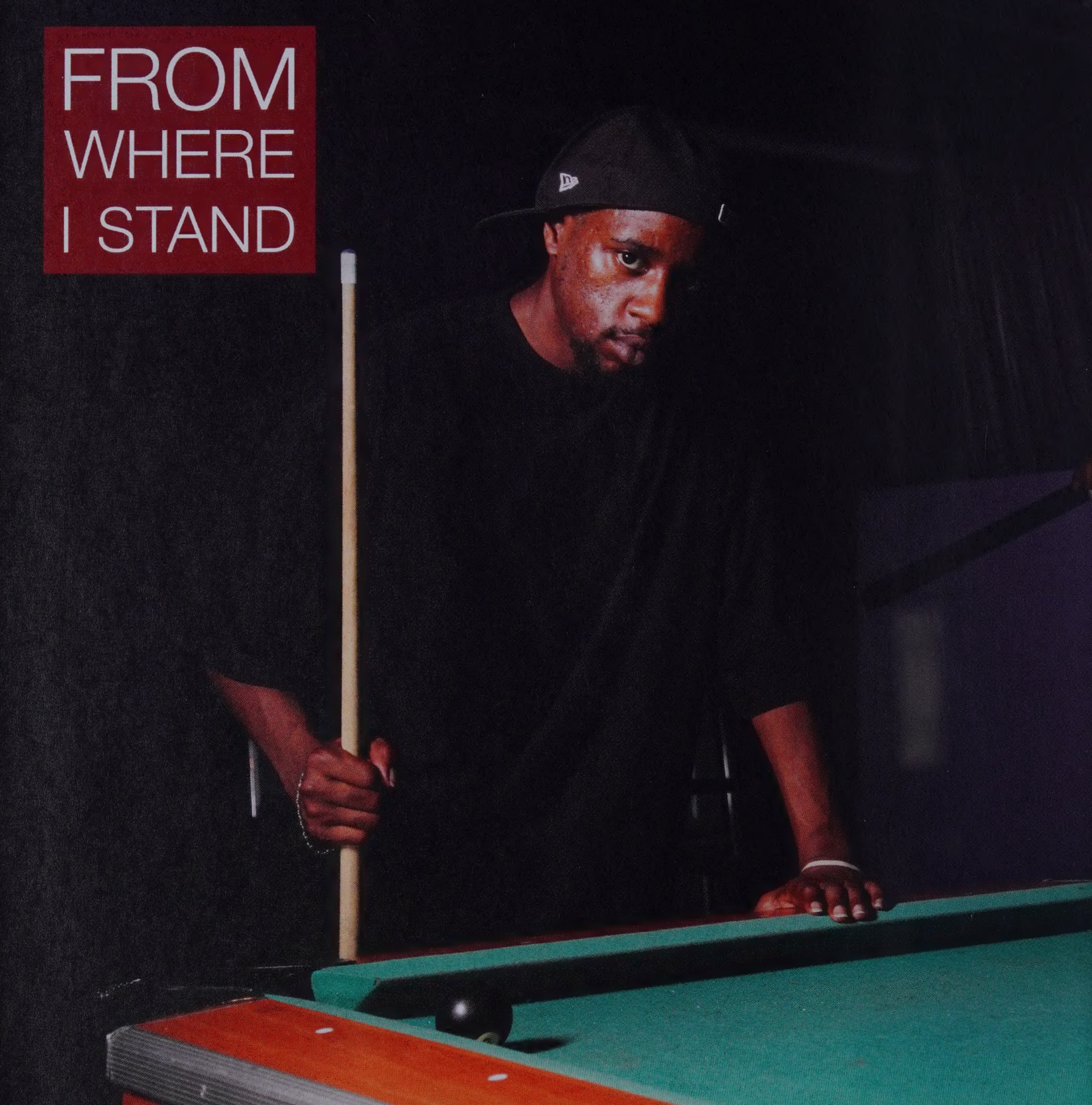
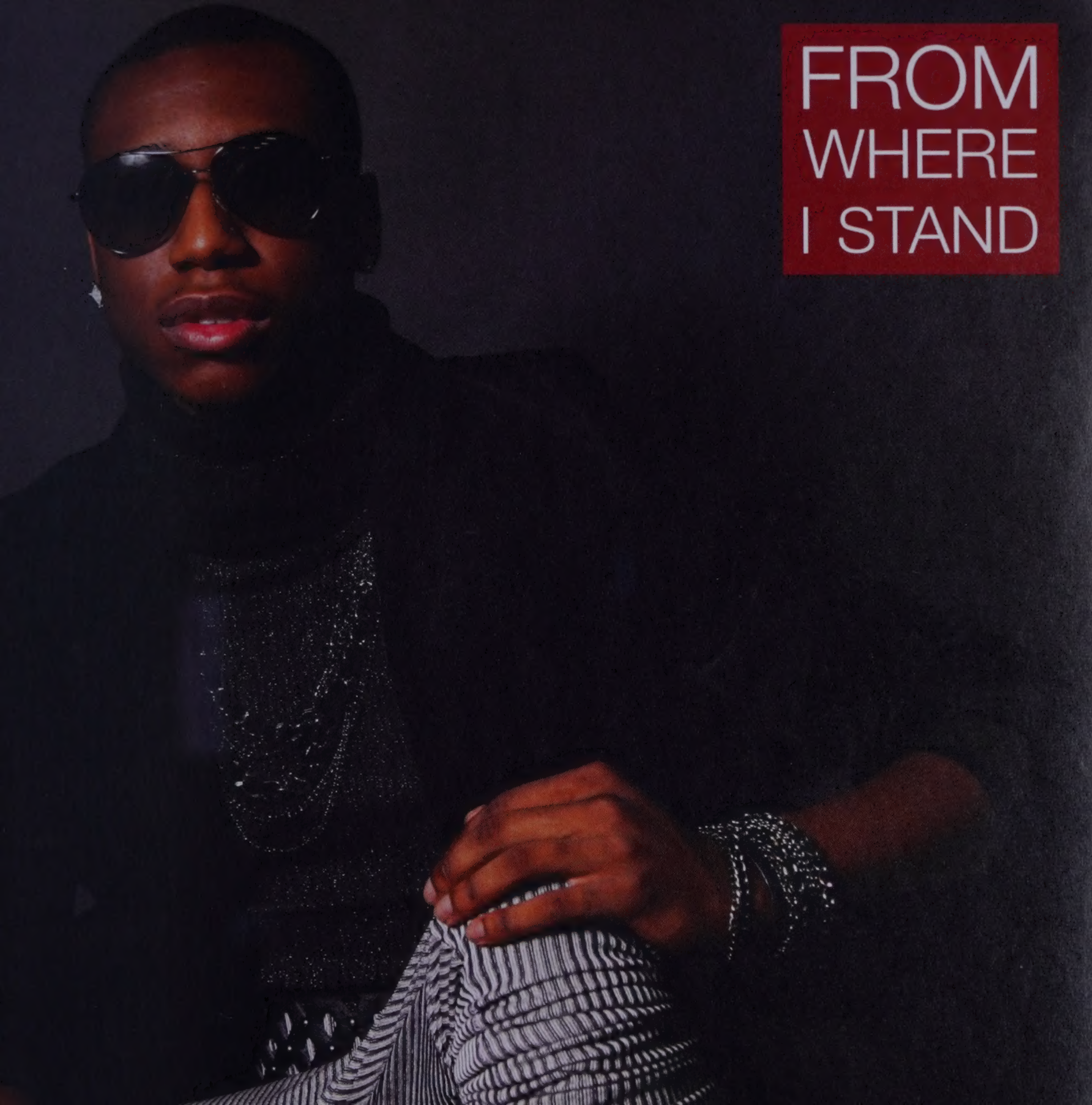


"My partner and I get tested together."

"My sexuality is a small part of who I am."



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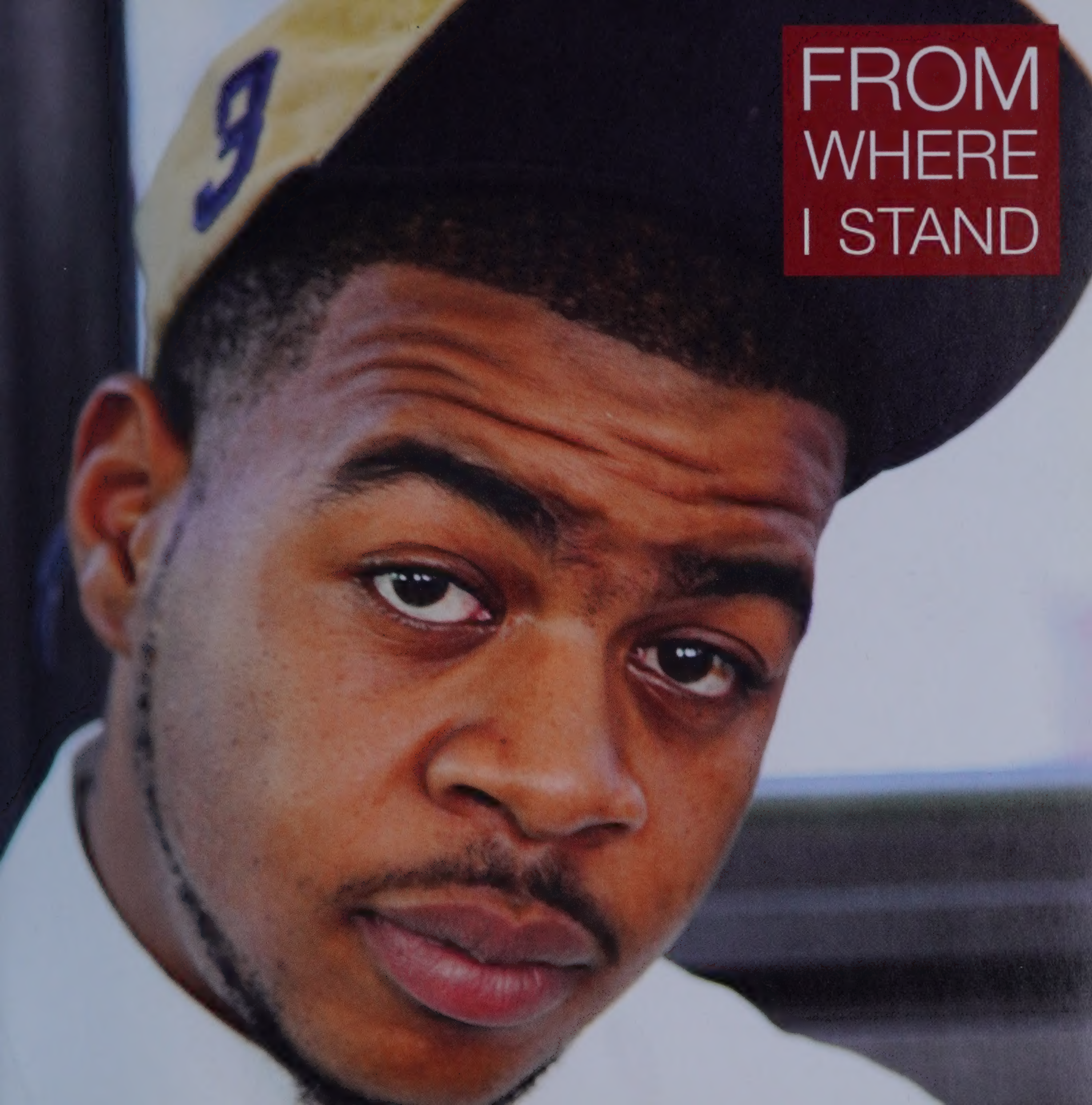
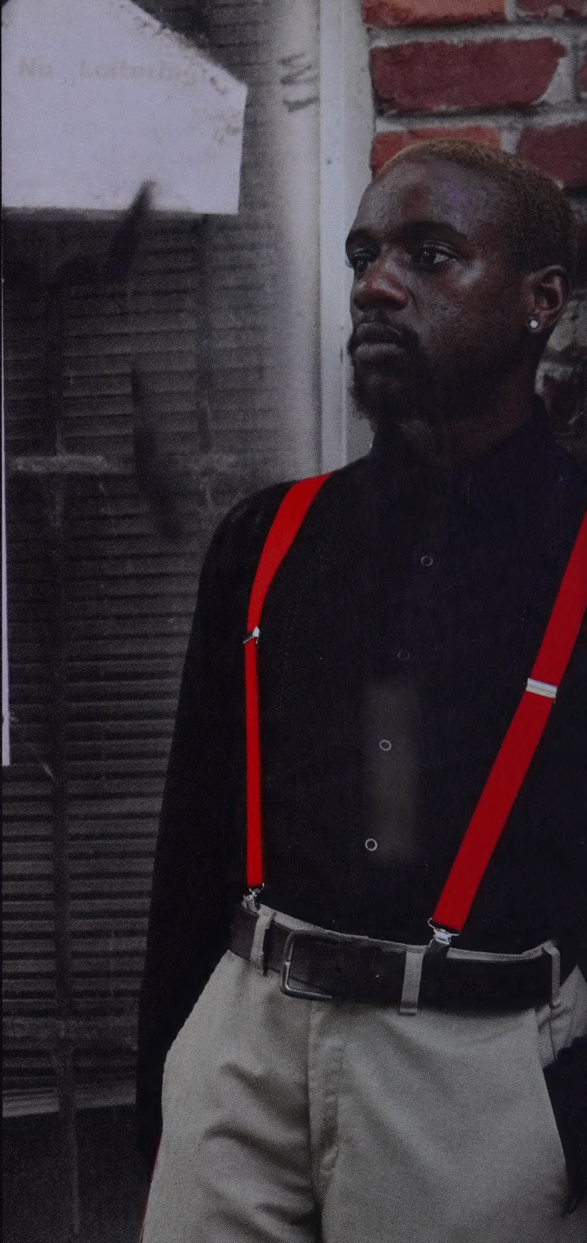
"No one can stand
between me and
happiness but ME!!"

"Sex is more than an act."



FROM WHERE I STAND

"We must learn to be proud."



FROM WHERE I STAND

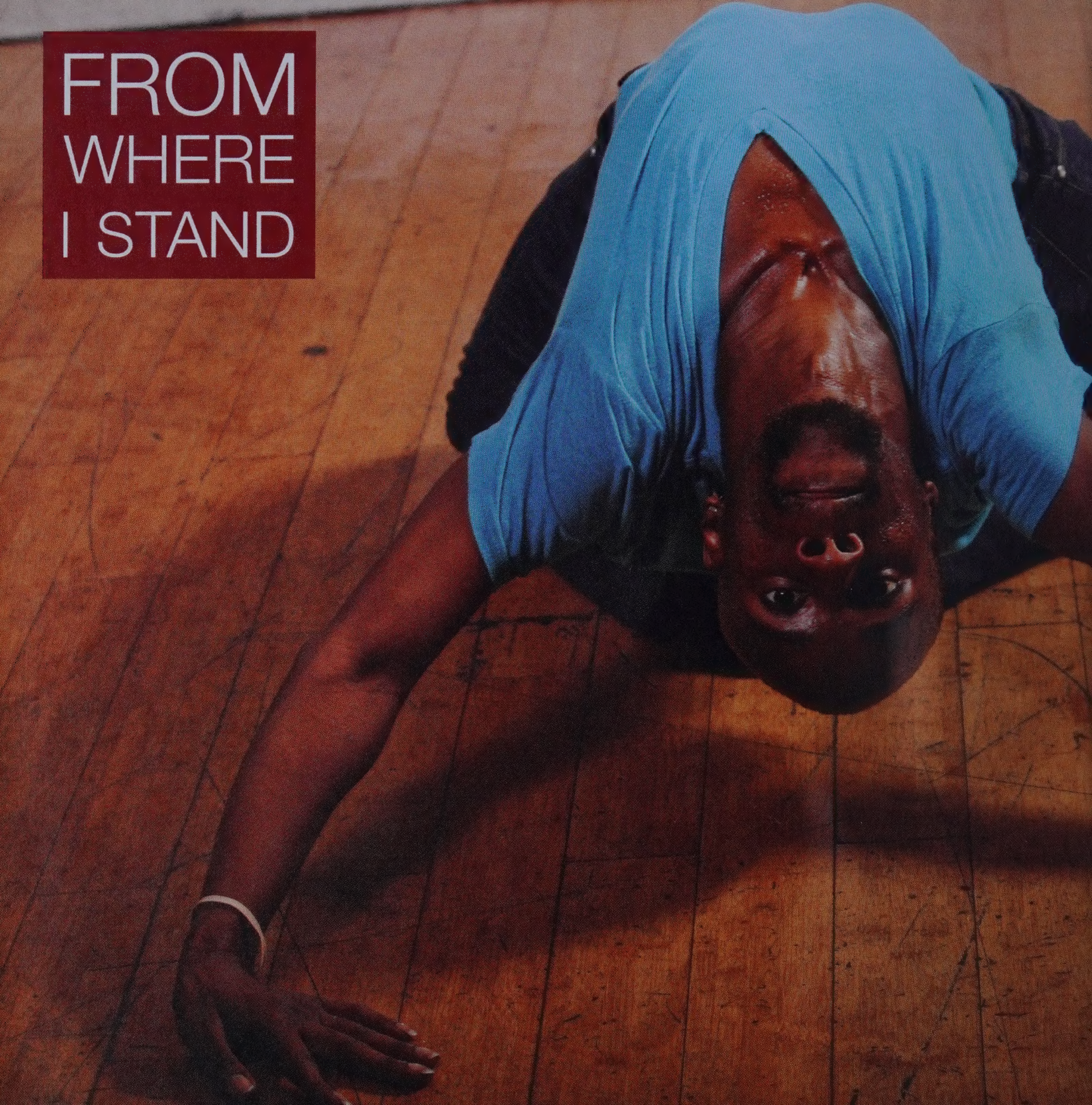
FROM WHERE I STAND

"We must stop magnifying the negative aspects of our lives."

"We should stop perpetuating negative stereotypes and stigmas around HIV."

FROM WHERE I STAND

FROM WHERE I STAND



"You have to live
as if you were
going to die tomorrow,
but learn as if you were
going to live forever."

"The joy of free will is priceless."

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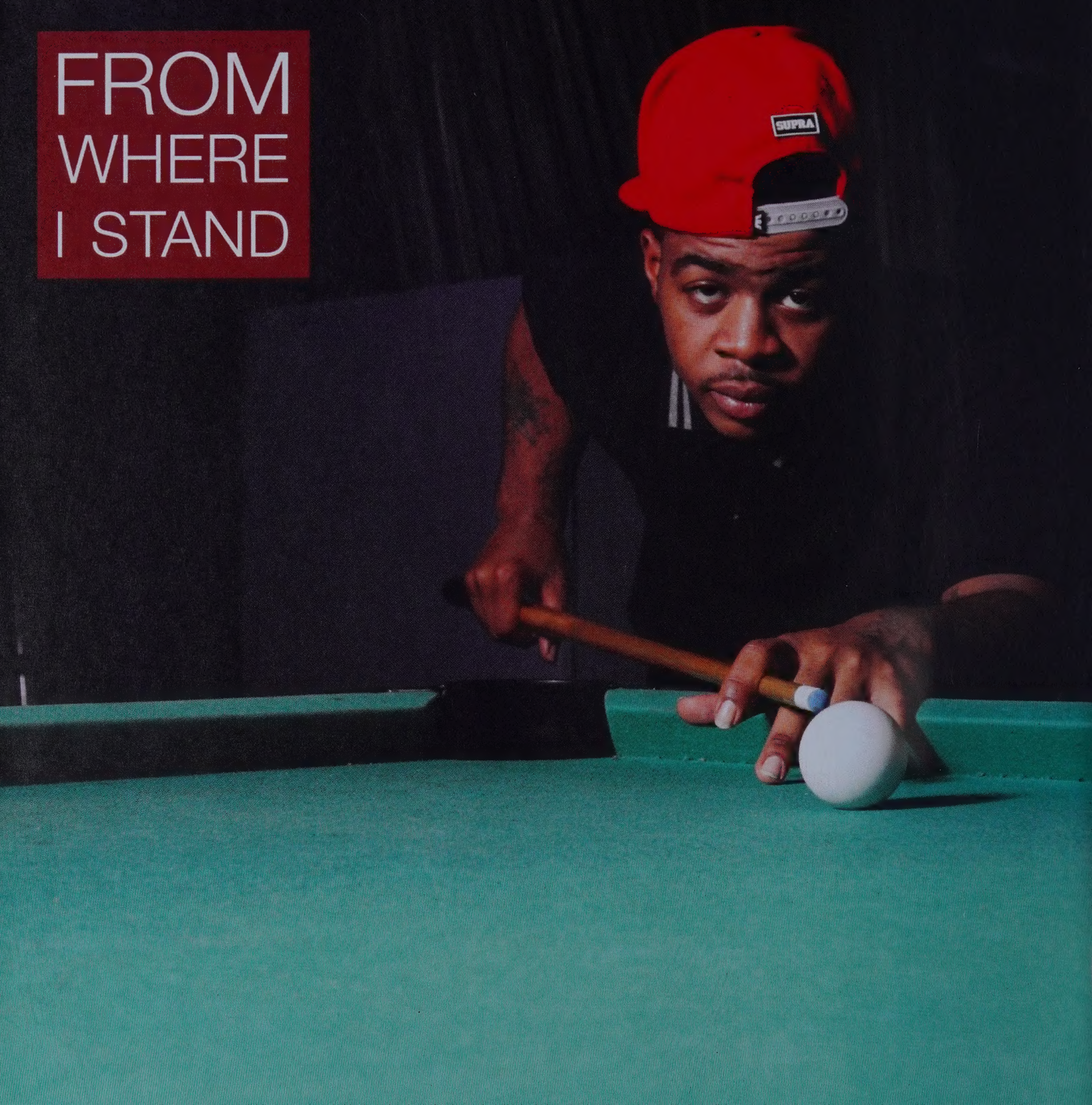
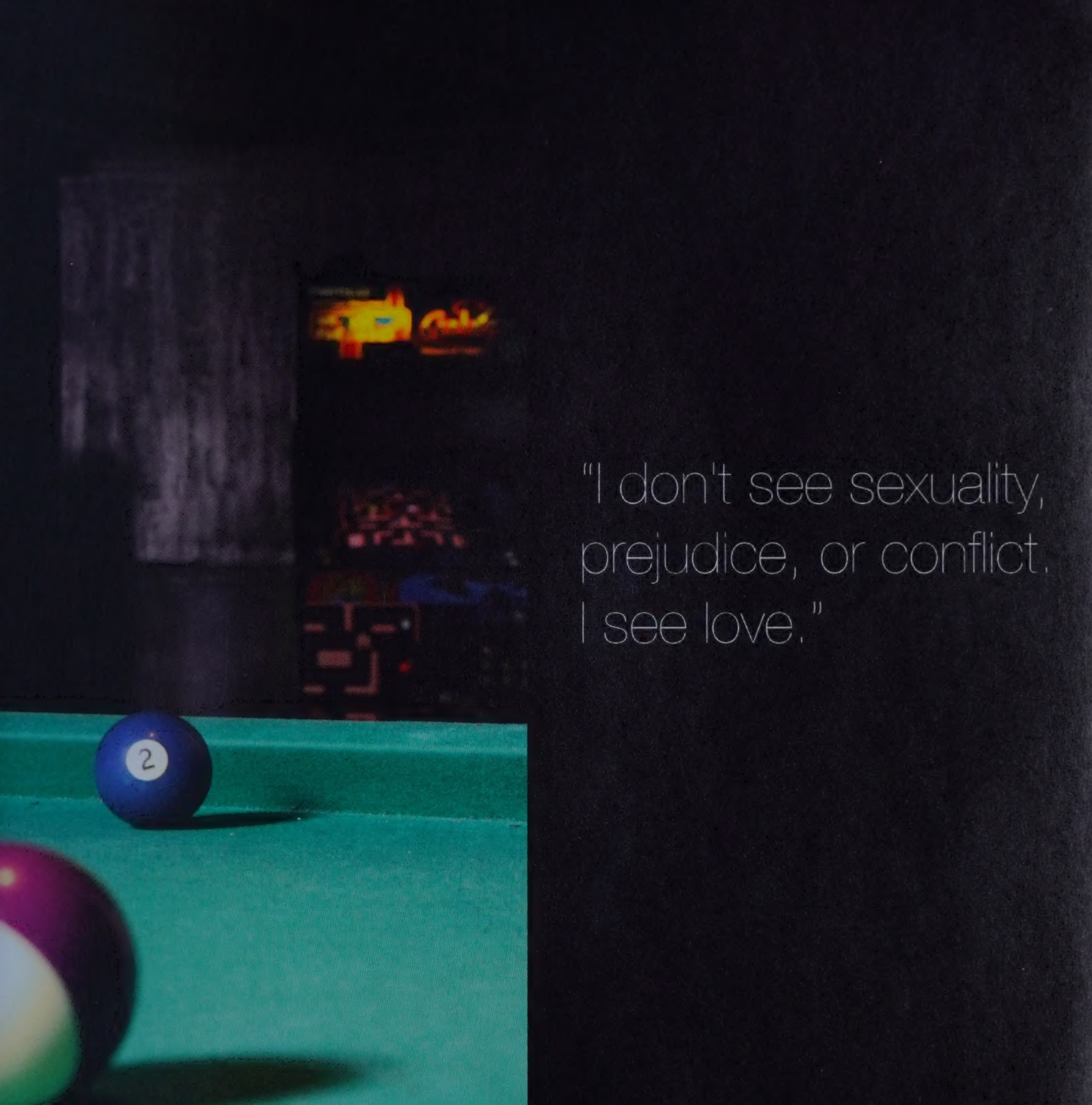
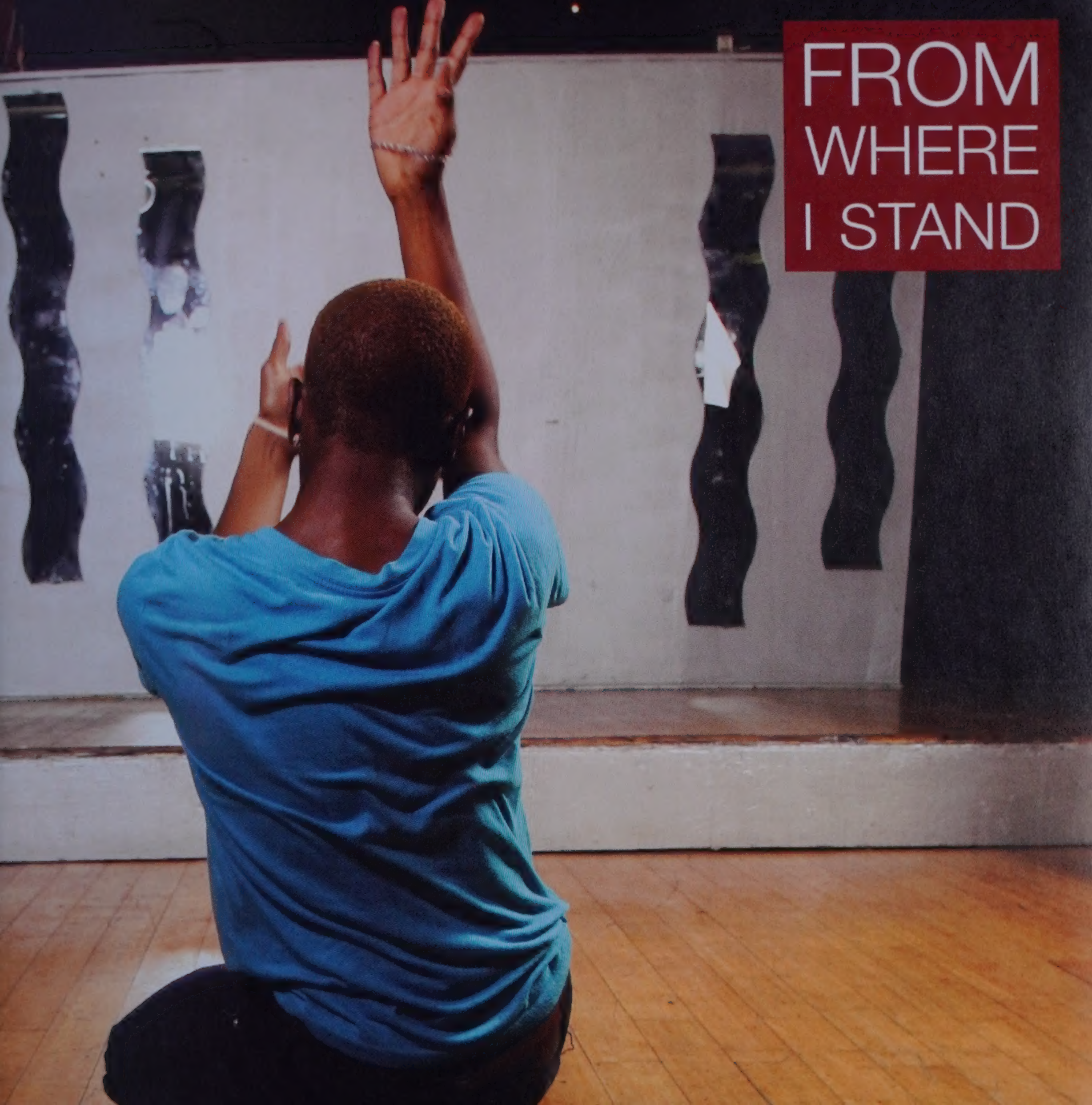



"I don't see sexuality, prejudice, or conflict. I see love."

"I'm proud to be a
Black Gay Man."



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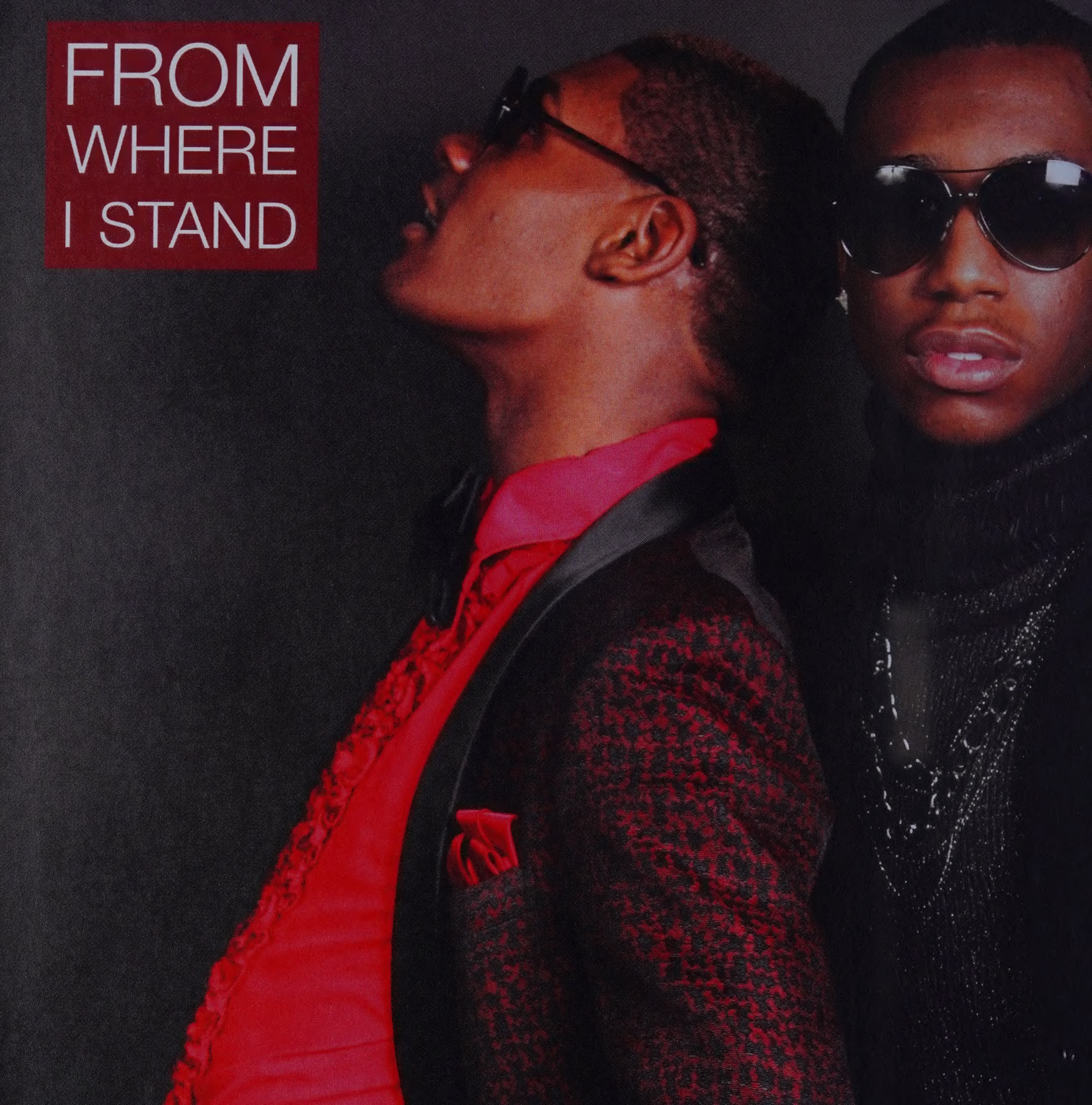
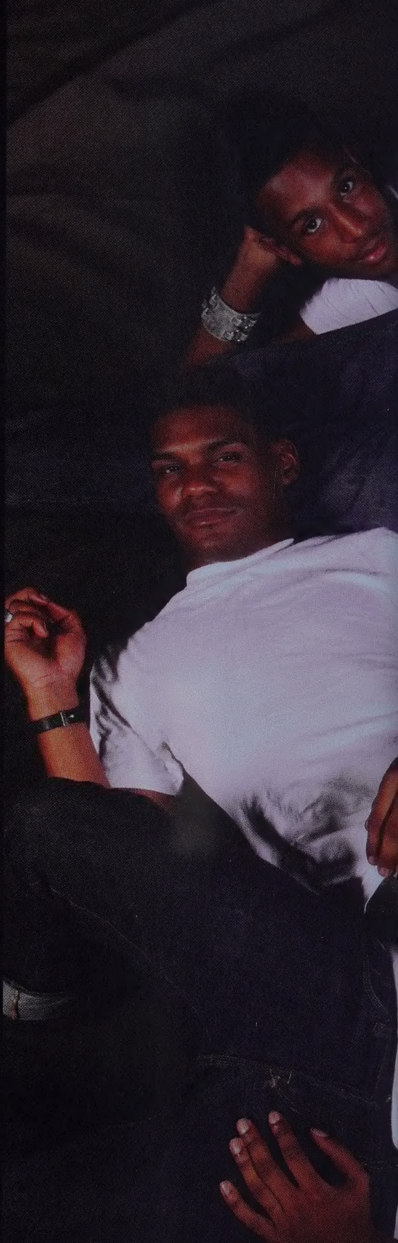


"Black Gay Men are Beautiful."

"HIV is not a death sentence."



FROM WHERE I STAND

FROM WHERE I STAND

"Being young black and gay doesn't mean being a statistic."

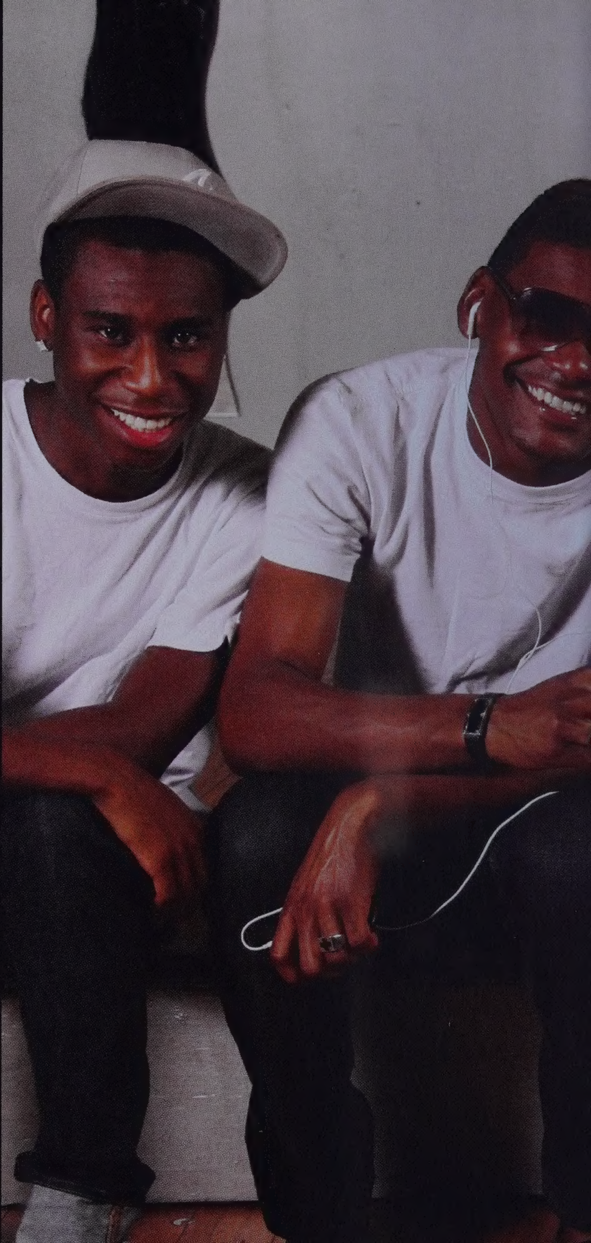
"'Black Gay Man' is not a high-risk category."

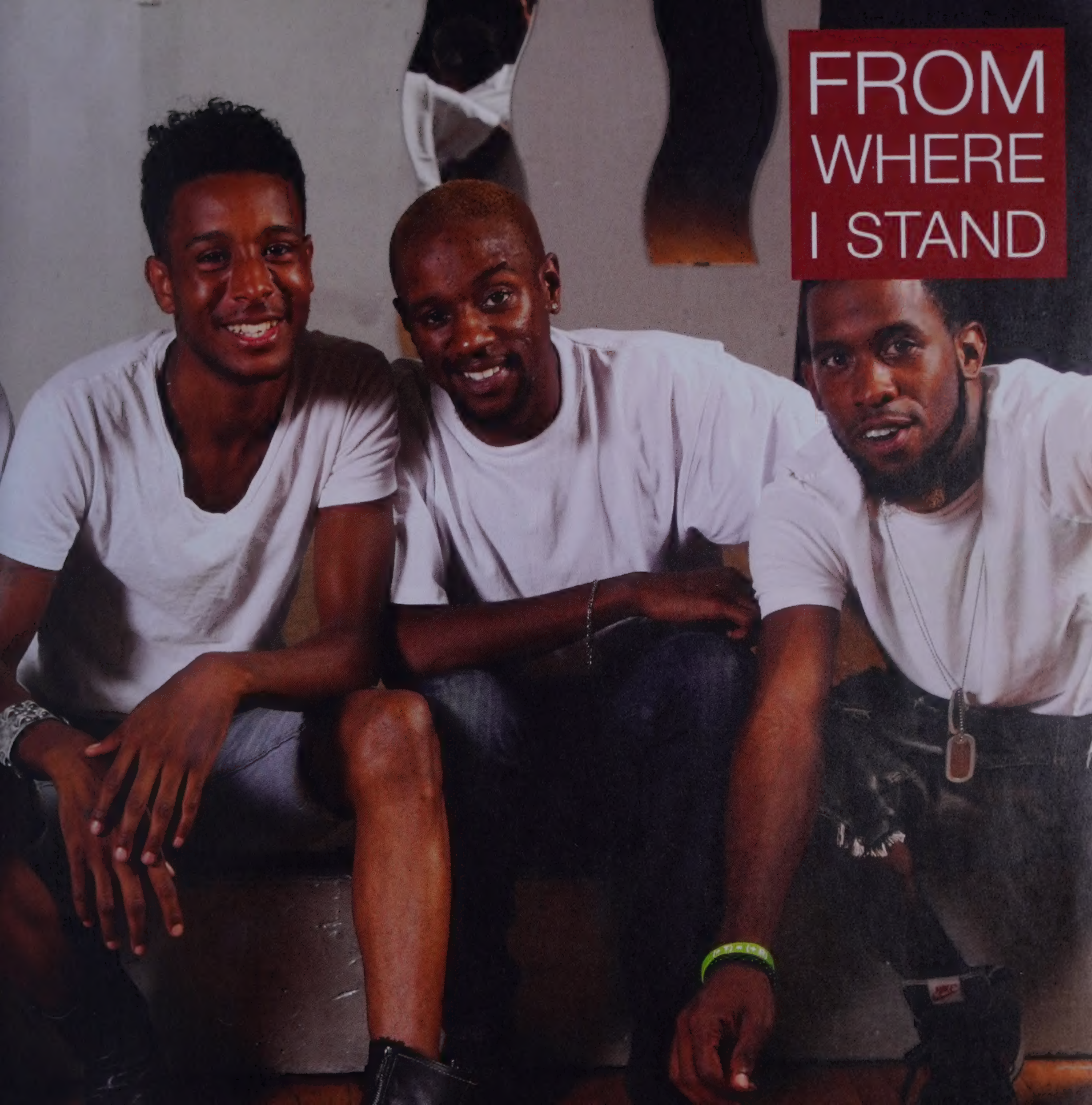
FROM WHERE I STAND

FROM WHERE I STAND

"Coming out was a barrier,
but now a beginning."

"Friendships are just as important as relationships."





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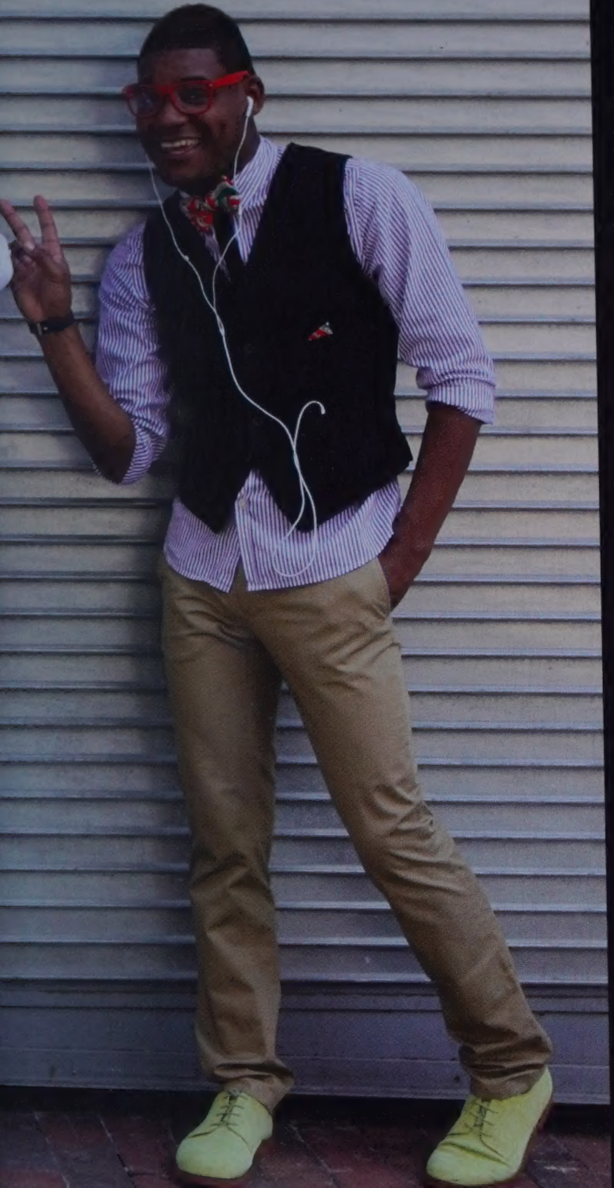
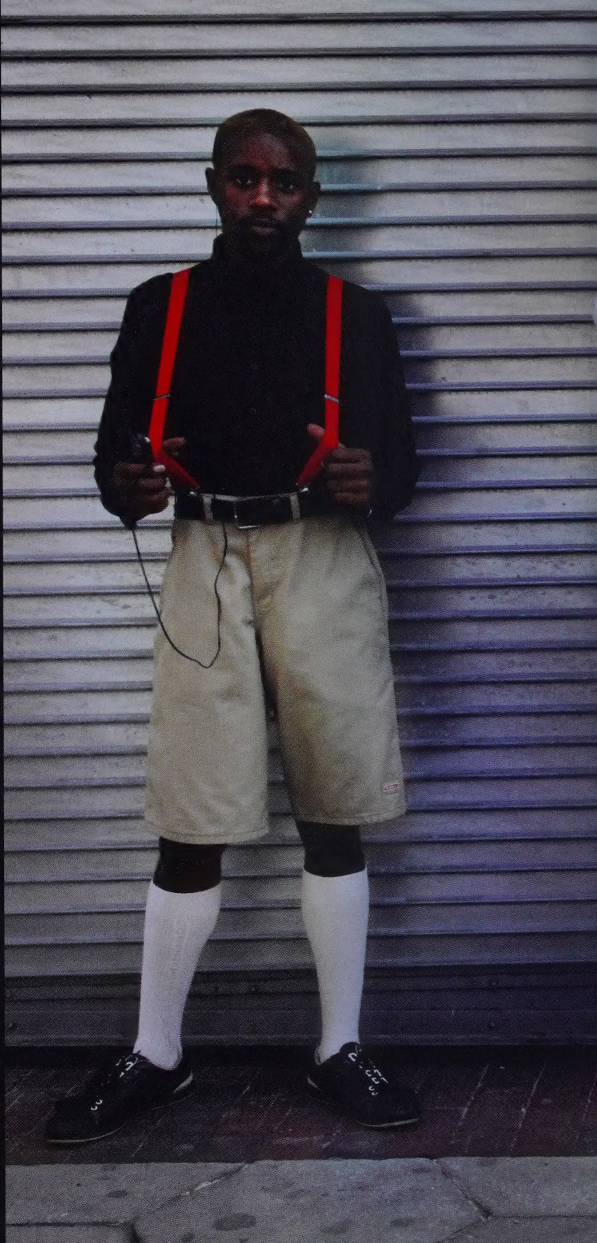


"I should live
in a world free
of stereotypes
and persecution."

FROM WHERE I STAND

"My life, my joys, and my troubles cannot be defined in 140 characters or less."

"This isn't a lifestyle...
it's a culture."



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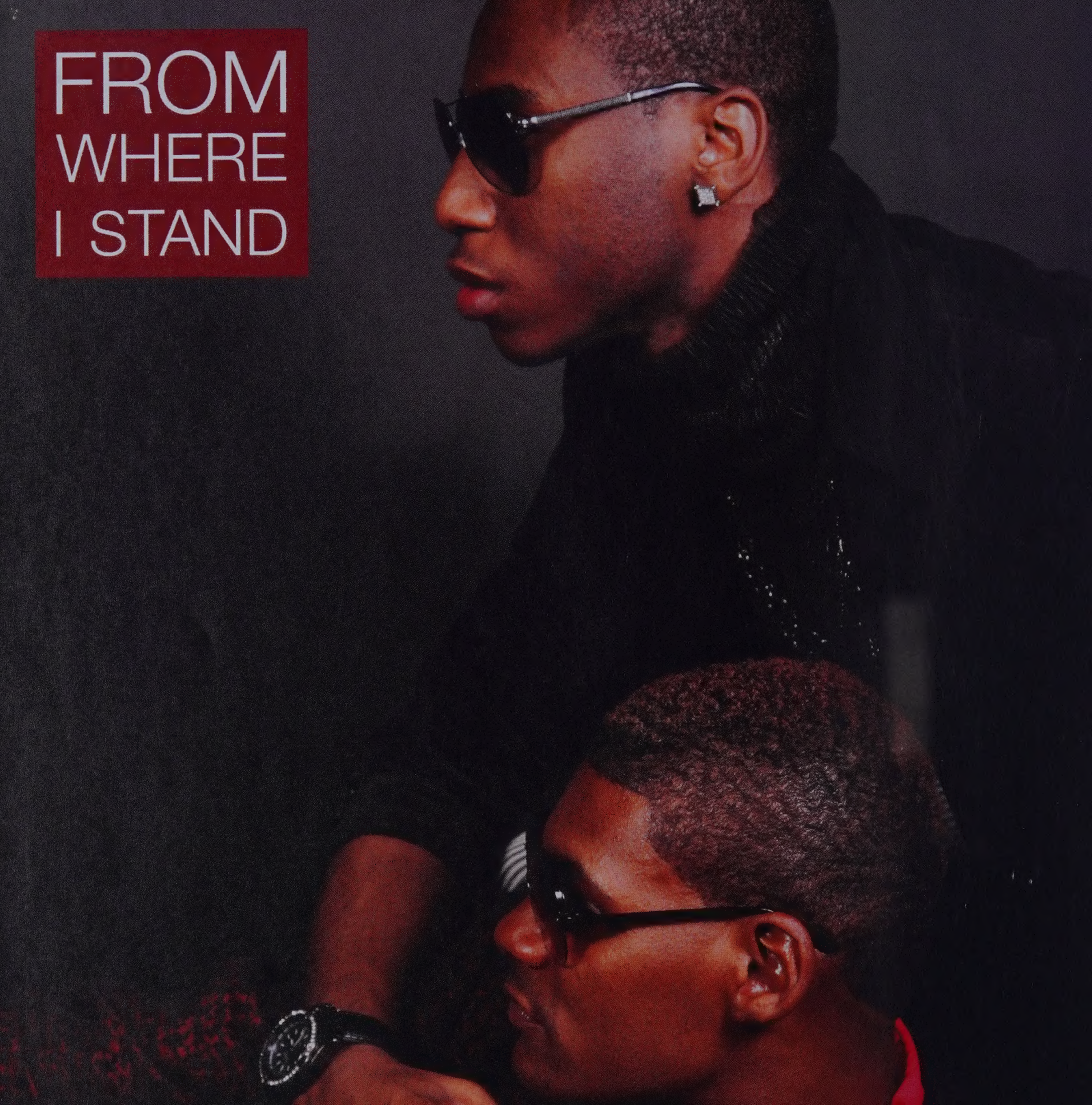

"We will never be accepted by society if we don't first begin to accept, love and respect ourselves."

"I am not alone."

FROM WHERE I STAND

Acknowledgements

Icon Andre Mizrahi – (Ballroom Icon and advocate) Andre contributed to the Atlanta ballroom history section. He has been a part of the ballroom community for over 25 years starting in New York and continuing in Atlanta.

Brandon "Evisu" Fields – Brandon was instrumental in putting together and styling the photo shoot. Brandon has been in the ballroom community for 13 years starting in Los Angeles and bringing his talents to Atlanta.

Russell "Mizrahi" Martin – Manager of Café '91, and a strong advocate for the empowerment of the black gay youth in the ballroom community. He provided the venue for the photo shoot.

James "Londyn Evisu" McCullough - Model (Best dressed) and fairly new to the ballroom community. His advice to young black gay men, "no matter from where you stand keep your head up."

James "Rocky Blahnik" Jones IV – Model (Realness w/Twist & Commentator vs. Commentator). Rocky lent his talents and his skills as a dancer and made the set hot! His advice to other young black gay men is to "love yourself first"

Domingo "Blahnik" Rodriguez – Model (Runway) as a strong supporter and advocate of the ballroom community. He believes "it's not the length of your life that counts, it what you do with the time you are given that matters."

JT Evisu – Model (School Boy Realness). As one of our youngest models, JT's main focus was being part of something positive and bringing his unique energy to the photo shoot.

Henry "Diamond" Horton – Model (Vogue Fem). As a dancer and performer Diamond was more than willing to lend his time and talents to the shoot. "Loving me is what makes me shine"

Travis "Gio Evisu" Brown – Model (School Boy Realness). His advice to other young black gay men is to "follow your dreams"

FROM
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AID
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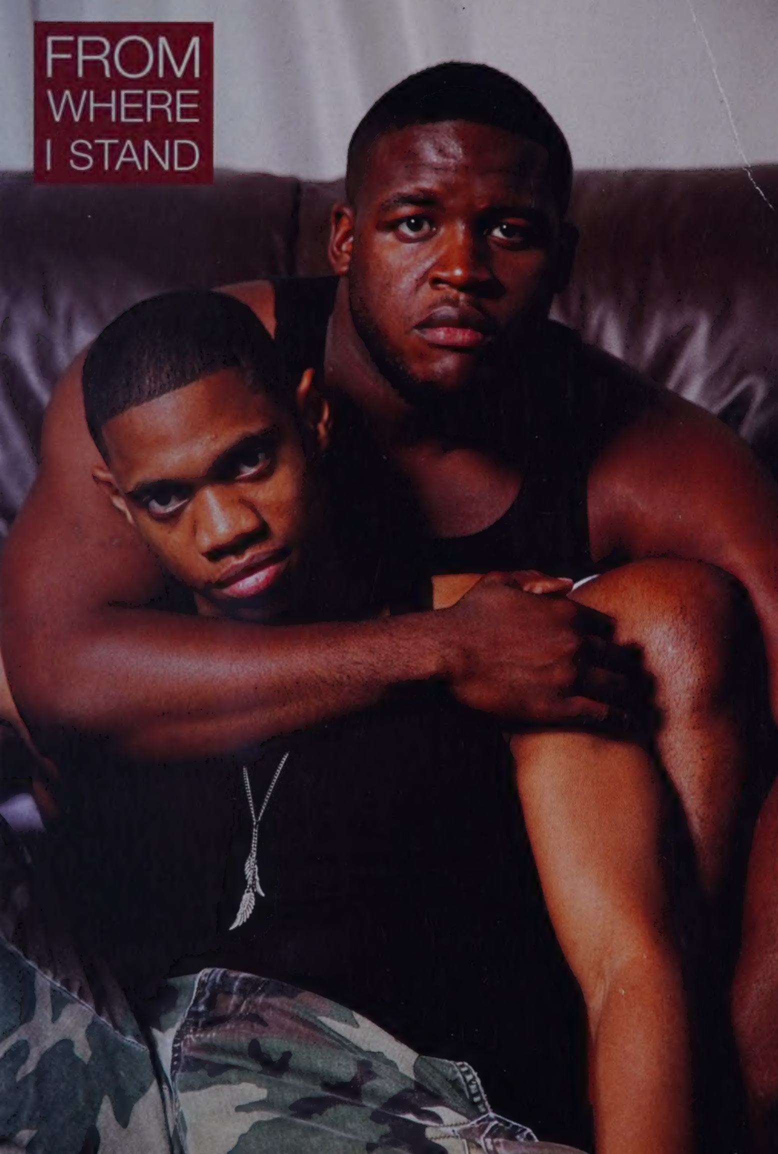

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From Where I Stand
I am resilient.

www.facebook.com/fromwhereistandatl

30 years
Saving And
Transforming Lives

Edited By: Charles Stephens and Clinton Jolliffi
Photography By: Carlton Mackey

Funding for this campaign was made possible by a cooperative agreement between AID Atlanta and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.